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The Bill Douglas Trilogy

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Title: *The Bill Douglas Trilogy*

Country of Origin: UK

Years: 1972; 1973; 1978

Language: English

Production Company: British Film Institute

Filming Locations: Newcraighall, Edinburgh (UK); Cairo (Egypt)

Director: Bill Douglas

Producers: Tony Bicat, Judy Cottam, Richard Craven, Geoffrey Evans, Nick Nascht, Charles Rees

Screenwriter: Bill Douglas

Cinematographers: Mick Campbell, Ray Orton, Gale Tattersall

Art Directors: Oliver Bouchier, Elsie Restorick

Editors: Mick Audsley, Brand Thumim, Peter West

Runtime: 172 minutes

Cast (Starring): Stephen Archibald, Hughie Restorick, Jean Taylor Smith, Helena Gloag, Karl Fieseler, Joseph Blatchley

Synopsis: Jamie and Tommy are effectively orphaned siblings, their mother committed to an asylum and their respective fathers absent, who live with their ailing maternal grandmother in almost unimaginable penury in a Scottish mining village during WWII and in the years immediately after. Jamie, the *Trilogy's* central character, is profoundly scarred by the dehumanising conditions in which he does not so much live as exist. In particular, a chronic lack of secure and sustaining emotional relationships with parent figures, biological or surrogate, appears to be the central source of a long-term distress so deep, it threatens to render its sufferer near-catatonic. The *Trilogy* follows Jamie through a succession of awful or abortive domestic arrangements, before he at last finds a sustaining physical and psychological place in the world. Life with Tommy and Granny is replaced after the latter's death with grudging adoption by Jamie's father and paternal grandmother. The fecklessness of the former and psychosis of the latter eventually drives Jamie into a state home for orphaned and abused children. Although the gaping wounds left by a wretched childhood seem to have destined him for either a life of vagrancy or an early suicide, personal salvation arrives in the shape of a period of National Service in the British Army during the 1950s. Posted to a military base in Egypt, Jamie there meets Robert, an educated and thoughtful young middle-class Englishman. Despite Jamie's painful scars, and the two men's markedly different personal backgrounds, they form an intense and unqualified friendship. The *Trilogy* ends with their demobilisation, and Robert's offer to extend his home to incorporate Jamie.

Critique: It is fitting that Bill Douglas's *Trilogy* is studded from the very outset with images concerned with the idea of elevation. As well as proving suggestive in any attempt to explore the complexity and power of the films' formal and emotional structures, this motif also echoes the terms of Douglas's critical reputation some two decades on from his death in 1991. Much scholarship constructs the *Trilogy* as Scottish cinema's advent and apotheosis, starting point and high point alike. Douglas is held up as an enduringly seminal figure to succeeding generations of artists for a number of reasons. He produced the films that made his international reputation despite facing wholly unpropitious film industrial circumstances in his native country. He overcame the glaring lack of distinctive and developed indigenous traditions of fiction filmmaking by synthesising an innovative and individual directorial style from his own cosmopolitan awareness of, and enthusiasm for, key movements in twentieth-century European and American cinemas. He transfigured the stuff of an unedifying and unremarkable post-WWII Scottish childhood into art of great emotional and visual power. He established the importance of autobiography as a creative guiding principle for many Scottish filmmakers of the succeeding three decades. For these and other reasons, the *Trilogy* remains a vital achievement within the context of Scottish cinema history: an accomplished work of art in its own right, but also a notably influential point of reference for many other native writers and directors throughout the remainder of the twentieth century and beyond.

Some necessarily brief examination of the elevation motif's place within the *Trilogy* may help explain why these films remain so critically admired today. For one thing, this recurring device symbolises not simply physical and cultural isolation, but also extraordinary personal responsiveness on the part of Douglas and Jamie, his narrative surrogate. Take, for example, our introduction to the latter, some three-and-a-half minutes into *My Childhood*, alone and scavenging scraps of coal at the summit of an immense slag heap. As a siren sounds to end a shift at the local mine, children dash excitedly to meet fathers returning home from work. The spectator briefly shares Jamie's hilltop view of this daily reunion, before the camera cuts to document the same event at close quarters on ground level. On one hand, our fleeting access to Jamie's all-encompassing physical perspective stems directly from his glaring emotional lack: he crouches, exposed and alone, high above his fellow children because they have parents and he does not. But at the same time, the central protagonist's pain bestows upon him something that his seemingly more fortunate counterparts do not possess, namely, a preternaturally heightened capacity for social and emotional perception. Right from its opening moments, the impact of Douglas's *Trilogy* relies equally on the content and colour of its maker's life experiences and the personal qualities these inculcated within him, ones that contributed to the development of a formidable artistic talent. Or, to put matters another way, while Jamie's situation at the start of *My Childhood* may be a physically and psychologically chilling one, it also affords the possibility of an unusually clear and comprehensive oversight of the world that this lonely child inhabits.

The sense that the perspective on post-WWII Scottish society and culture which the *Trilogy* offers is consistently elevated in figurative terms, even if only intermittently so in a literal equivalent, is stressed yet more emphatically by the opening of *My Ain Folk*. Here, Jamie's brother Tommy cries

cathartic tears in the local cinema while watching Technicolor footage, from the Hollywood movie *Lassie Come Home* (1943), of the eponymous canine performer standing alone on a rocky promontory, a breath-taking natural landscape visible below her in the background. This moment of extraordinary private transcendence is immediately contrasted with an everyday one of collective entombment: adopting the unenviable position of miners crammed into a pit lift at the beginning of their shift, the camera shows the local agricultural landscape above ground giving way to undifferentiated blackness as the men are transported the surface. Douglas's point here is not that cinema allows artists and their audiences the opportunity to draw a clear-cut distinction between certain orders of image and human experience that could or should be acknowledged as transcendent (the idealised anthropomorphism of a 1940s mainstream American film) and others (the relentless physical grind of a mid-century Scottish working-class community's daily life and culture) that emphatically can or should not. Rather, he argues through example that the artistic medium he works within offers anyone who creates and/or consumes it with sufficient care the possibility of finding copious reserves of emotional and cultural meaning within apparently mundane narrative materials. In the sequence under consideration here, for example, Douglas recuperates two things at once. The *Lassie* footage is shown to represent something more just than a laughable excess of aesthetic and emotional stimulation; at the same time, the miners' daily toil is rescued – but not romanticised – through the assertion that it represents more than simply an absolute absence of such qualities.

The ending of *My Ain Folk*, the *Trilogy*'s final instalment, once again uses the motif of elevation to emphasise the sheer distinctiveness and power of its maker's thematic concerns and formal style. These might be described, however counterintuitively, as acts of measured transfiguration – frequently euphoric in impact, but rarely – if ever – excessive in intention or execution. The gradually amplified sound of aircraft engines accompanies a cut from the previous scene of Jamie and Robert's demobilisation. This creates the fleeting illusion, for 10 seconds or so, that the near-featureless, bleached landscape seen passing right to left before the camera might be the Egyptian desert far below the two young men returning to Britain. Of course, Douglas swiftly reveals that what is really seen at this point are the paperless walls of Jamie's now-abandoned first home, the domicile viewers witnessed the boy living in (and through) at the *Trilogy*'s outset. Yet despite being orientated, logically speaking, on a horizontal axis rather than a vertical one, and being positioned a metre or so from, rather than thousands of feet above, where and what the camera records, a marked sense of elevation in the figurative sense persists. This is so not least because in closing the *Trilogy*, its creator seems to figure his eventual escape from a wretchedly unhappy childhood as a release that emanated from an artistic willingness to audaciously re-imagine, and thus re-evaluate, his individual history and native culture. Recreation of such things in an ostensibly straightforward documentary manner with a view to clear-cut, wholesale rejection of them is precisely what Douglas seeks to avoid. Instead, the *Trilogy* works unsparing social interrogation and bravura creative imagination into mutually sustaining processes and ends. Above all else, it is perhaps this remarkable artistic achievement and ability that makes Bill Douglas such an enduring significant point of reference for the students, critics and makers of Scottish cinema who have followed in his footsteps.

Jonathan Murray